

"WOMEN BUILDERS OF COMMUNITIES AND DREAMS"

Nancy Erickson is an 8th grade homeschooled student. Her essay on Helen Keller won the middle school division of this year's Women's Commission Essay Contest.

Helen Keller

by Nancy Erickson

*She couldn't see.
She couldn't hear.
She couldn't speak.*

Nevertheless she left a lasting legacy throughout the communities she lived in. Helen Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, to Arthur and Kate Keller, a well-to-do couple. Two years later, in 1882, little Helen fell very ill with scarlet fever. Helen survived, but her sight and hearing were gone forever. For the next five years, Helen was disoriented, unable to communicate with anyone. This pitiful condition was transformed, however, when her parents hired a teacher, Anne Sullivan. Anne taught Helen the letters of the alphabet for the deaf and opened up the world to her.

Helen's understanding and creativity soared, and soon she went to the Perkins Institution for the Blind. It was around this point that Helen Keller showed her true community spirit. Many, having gained new knowledge, would have used it for their own interests. Helen did nothing of the sort. When she was only thirteen years old, she and some friends formed a committee to make her hometown a better place. She wrote, "... [We] formed a club, the object of which is to work for the establishment of a free public library in Tuscumbia." And she succeeded! In just a few years, Helen was already enriching her community with access to books---books that she herself couldn't read!

But the library was just the first of Helen's many accomplishments. When she was twenty-four years old, she graduated from Radcliff being the first DeafBlind person to graduate from college. During this time she wrote "The Story of My Life," her first book.

Out of college, Helen devoted her life to helping other people in the deaf and blind community. Dismayed with the lack of education and foul treatment given to most blind people, she wrote countless articles and gave lectures (with an interpreter), pleading for their welfare. She did the same for her fellow deaf people. Over the course of many years, she raised funds to support the American Foundation for the Blind, through the "Helen Keller Endowment Fund."

Then she turned her attention to the global community. She spoke out against child labor, and fought for Women's Rights. She visited common people at their work. "I have visited sweatshops, factories, crowded slums. If I could not see it, I could smell it," she stated. In 1915, Helen founded Helen Keller International, a charity program fighting to prevent blindness and poverty all over the world.

Helen's hard work did not go unnoticed. In addition to innumerable other prestigious awards, in 1964 President Lyndon Johnson awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, our highest civilian medal. Helen fought for human rights until her death in 1968. She lived a full life, making thousands of other people's lives better. From her hometown community, to the deaf and blind community, to the entire world community, Helen Keller will be remembered forever as a woman who had tremendous influence despite her physical challenges.

Anisha Parikh is an 11th grade student at Hammond High School. Her essay on Mrs. Lee Ann Beall, an English teacher at Hammond High School, won the high school division of this year's Women's Commission Essay Contest.